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### Lub Ntuj Tshiab "Under a New Sky"

Kia Marie Lor

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# The Wagner-Berger Prize for Excellence in Creative Writing

In 1987, Patricia and Leonard Porcello endowed this prize to honor Patricia's parents, Louis and Mary Wagner-Berger, and to support college women who are interested in writing short stories and novels. It is designed to encourage and reward excellence in creative writing at the College of St. Benedict.

The Wagner-Berger Prize for fiction is the first scholarship of its kind at the College of St. Benedict. It is a scholarship awarded annually to the CSB student who submits the most original, previously unpublished short story. All submissions are judged by a committee of English Department members, and the winner receives an award of \$1,000. Studio One is honored to publish this year's winner, Kia Marie Lor.

## **Lub Ntuj Tshiab** **“Under A New Sky”**

*At first this was a letter to my mother. Now it is a story about us.*

I'm standing on a peak on the highest mountain range in the world, the Himalayas, and all I can see is you, Niam (mom). Of course you aren't here with me on this fine April day. You are on the opposite side of the world, back home in America. It is the first time in my twenty years of life to be this far from home, to be under this new sky. Niam, you aren't physically here with me but you are mentally here in every detail I see. I can see your face in the majestic mountains. I can taste the health you brag about in the fresh and clear streams. Now I understand why you always complimented the American roads; here the rigid roads are filled with rocks, pebbles and potholes. I can hear your voice at the back of my mind saying, "Minnesota is so flat my child; you are missing out on the beautiful nature I grew up in." Women are carrying heavy firewood on their backs, kids are running around naked, and families have their wet clothes hanging outside on the clothesline to dry. I don't fit in this place. My back is not strong enough to bear this heavy firewood. My clothes are too thick to dry on the line. I don't belong under this sky. This sky is foreign to me but I know it's familiar to you.

Niam, you used to tell me the story of how we left the refugee camp in Panatnikom, Thailand, how we boarded an airplane, had two layovers – one in Tokyo and the other in Los Angeles – and landed in Minnesota with our one-way tickets. It was in the summer of 1995 and I was four years old. You were twenty-six years old and nine months pregnant with Gao Chia. You gave birth to her shortly after we landed in St. Paul, Minnesota, making Gao Chia the first person in our family to become a United States citizen. You named her Gao Chia (Nkauj Tshiab, literally translates to New Girl) because we were in a new world.

St. Paul became our new permanent home. As much as you detested the Whoppers at Burger King there was no turning back for you. The 10,000 lakes did not fascinate you. The Mall of America bored you. There were no mountains or crystal clear rivers in St. Paul. July turned to December and the snow buried the earth with icy, cold white fluff. That was when you came to know that we couldn't wear flip flops outside, instead we needed winter boots and coats (which we couldn't afford). You said icy, cold, white fluff on earth was abnormal. I believed you. Naturally.

But in 3rd grade science class I learned that the earth is tilted at a 23.5 degree angle, which is why we have four seasons: spring, summer, autumn and winter. The pattern of the seasons in Minnesota was normal, much like the snow falling from the sky in December. That was when you became "abnormal," Niam. You became abnormal because you believed people should drive on the left side of the road. You became abnormal for thinking that flushing the toilet was scary. You became abnormal because you questioned why every house had a T.V., why people mowed their lawn, why people showered in a bathtub with shower curtains, why we had to pay rent every month and document everything on paper. Because you kept reminding me about how odd these things were, you eventually became the outcast. You didn't fit in this place; you didn't belong under the American sky.

Because you were always out of place I was frustrated growing up with you. I kept comparing you with other mothers, questioning why you couldn't be more normal like them. Like why were you so dependent on everyone? You married three times to three abusive men who didn't have large enough hearts to love your children, just so you could depend on their help. Why couldn't you drive? You forced me to take driver's education so I could get my license at sixteen in order to drive the family around. Why couldn't you speak English? I still remember visiting your

psychologist when I was only in third grade. Your translator was late to the appointment so I had to translate the first part. Since I was able to comprehend a little English you thought I knew enough to inform the psychologist that you were stressed out. In Hmong stress means nyuas siab, literally translated as “heavy heart.” I shyly and reluctantly told the psychologist with my broken English, “My mom say she have very heavy heart,” knowing that the sentence made no sense. At the time I was upset at myself for not knowing the English definition for “stress.” Later I became upset at you for setting me up to fail, though you didn’t know that I’d failed.

You couldn’t support me educationally, and the distance between us grew wider. I worked hard to achieve academic success in school. Third grade left and twelfth grade came in 2009. It was senior year and I was at the apex of my academic game. I surged into the top ten percentile of my class and earned myself a six-year full-ride Gates Millennium Scholarship to any college in the United States. I remember that spring night in May; we sat in front of Mrs. Lynch for a parent-teacher conference at Johnson High School. I found myself translating – again.

At one point during the conference, Mrs. Lynch said, “Kia is a phenomenal student. She is very studious and polite. Many people adore her. She never misbehaves and she completes all her assignments on time.” She commented, “Kia is a great person and it was wonderful having her in class.” She ended by saying that “You should be proud that Kia is your daughter.”

I nodded and smiled at Mrs. Lynch’s compliments. Then I turned towards you, Niam, and looked at your numb, blank, stolid face that was unable to recognize the huge vocabulary Mrs. Lynch used. My lips went numb. Suddenly my face burned red. I became shy. Ashamed. How in the world was I supposed to translate to you all these great things about me? How was I supposed to brag

about myself like this in front of you? I couldn't find the courage to tell you these things. Plus, culturally you've taught me to not be so vain about myself. Three seconds passed by as I lowered my head and looked at my shoes and condensed all of Mrs. Lynch's words into six simple Hmong words: "Nws hais tias kuv keej heev." (She said that I'm very smart.) Again, I blamed you for not understanding English in the first place. If you knew English then I would not even have to fight with myself like this.

I became more frustrated when you couldn't understand why I wanted to go to college an hour and half away from home. You wanted me to stay home, to stay close to you. Hmong sons could venture the world but Hmong daughters were forbidden to leave the home. You know me, Niam, and you knew how much I detested these Hmong gender restrictions. I defied you and went away. I thought distancing me from you was the solution. But Niam, the farther I go away from you, the closer you become. You have no idea how much this distance has changed how I see you.

All my life I've only seen you as the Hmong woman under the sunlight of my sky in America. I've only seen an unstable woman who could not fend for herself. With blindfolds over your eyes and hopes under your breath you left the refugee camps of Thailand and came to America, a country where the "American Dream" is far from your reach. Yet, Niam, it never occurred to me that you were a professional fire-starter, banana tree chopper, firewood carrier, rice field cutter and hand-laundry-washer. You left your bamboo hut to come to a four-walled concrete building. Naturally you would be unstable in America; naturally you would lose that talented strong woman you were to the alien world of America.

Today on this high mountain range, your voice plays like music at the back of my mind: *"Kuv coj nej tuaj rau teb chaws Mekas kom nej pom kev vam meej es nej thiaj tsis txom nyem li kuv."* (I brought all of you to America so you can see opportunities

and possibilities and will not have to suffer from poverty like me.) The greatest thing you've given me and my brothers and sisters is an escape route away from war in the refugee camps in Thailand. You gave us the world. I wish you were standing on this Himalaya mountain next to me. It's such a beautiful view, Niam.

*I stand here imagining how I might share this epiphany with you when I return home. I picture you and me alone in the kitchen because that is the only place where we can have civil conversations. In the kitchen, you were my teacher, and I was your student. You would be boiling chicken for dinner, your spoon hitting the side of the pot as you stir salt and black pepper into the broth. I would be rinsing the jasmine rice twice, then putting it in the rice cooker and pressing it down to "cook". Our backs would be turned toward each other. We have never been able to meet eye to eye, but we would be able to listen ear to ear. In the silence I would work up the courage to tell you that I was standing on the highest mountain range in the world and it was the most beautiful view ever, and on that mountain peak it hit me that you've climbed a much higher mountain than this one. In fact, you've climbed many mountains higher than Everest; you've seen more of the world than I give you credit for. And I would apologize for blaming you for everything. I'd take back the excruciating words I'd thrown at you, each word like a dagger into your heart. One by one I would take out those daggers and heal your wounds. All these years I blamed you for my flaws and the things I couldn't do. I blamed you that I couldn't shop at the malls because we were too poor. We shopped at the thrift stores. I blamed you for not having grand birthday parties for me, not having a home I could bring my friends to, not being able to communicate with my teachers at conferences. I blamed you for making me responsible for paying the bills. I blamed you for being weak and dependent on men – I never dated because seeing your relationships terrified me. But I take it all back. You never asked for any of this, Niam. I would turn around and see you standing*

*there smiling at me with your short gray hair and the forty-four year old wrinkles around your dark brown eyes. You would say to me that I was everything you wanted me to be and that you knew all along I was going to realize it on my own. We would be liberated from our haunting past.*

But in reality I know I'll return home busy unpacking my four month's worth of belongings from India and repacking to head out to college again. I'll use my "busyness" as an excuse to mask my emotions because I will be too shy to tell you that I saw your face in the mountains. It'd be too strange for you to hear it, too; you wouldn't know how to cope with the strange epiphany.

*At first this was a letter to you, Niam, my mother. Now it is a story about us.  
A story you'll never read.*

*Kia Marie Lor*  
College of Saint Benedict